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ABSTRACT

An argument is made for stressing rhythm and intonation (the prosody of the language) when teaching pronunciation in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) courses. A review of pronunciation teaching revealed that ESL methodology was formed largely from structural linguistics and behavioral psychology. These theories produced at least two concepts that are believed to have a negative impact on pronunciation instruction. The two concepts are: (1) that the most important part of pronunciation is individual sounds, and (2) that learning comes from mechanical practice. These two principles together have produced the ubiquitous minimal pair drill; the result has been large scale abandonment of pronunciation because it is a discouraging manner of teaching. The focusing of prosody is a fundamental part of the communication system, helping direct attention to the most informative part of the stream of speech and organizing thought groups so as to assist the listener in processing the information. By emphasizing prosody rather than individual sounds, pronunciation teaching comes within a more communicative setting. The whole rhetorical flow of meaning is tied together by the music of the language. (GLR)

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Pronunciation: what should we be teaching?

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Abstract

Why has pronunciation teaching been abandoned in so many ESL programs? Perhaps the reason is that ideas about language teaching have changed, but pronunciation classes have not. In the 1950's, ESL/EFL methodology was formed largely from structural linguistics and behavioural psychology. These theories produced at least two concepts which, when combined, have had an unfortunate effect on the teaching of pronunciation: 1) the most important part of pronunciation is individual sounds, and 2) learning comes from mechanical practice. Together, these two principles produced the ubiquitous minimal pair drill. The result has been large scale abandonment of pronunciation, for the simple reason that teaching this way has been discouraging.

Instead of putting our main attention on individual sounds, we should be focussing on rhythm and intonation: the prosody of the language. Prosody is a fundamental part of the communication system, helping direct attention to the most informative part of the stream of speech and organizing thought groups so as to assist the listener to process the information. By emphasizing prosody rather than individual sounds, we will be giving pronunciation teaching a more communicative setting; the whole rhetorical flow of meaning is tied together by the music of the language.

Pronunciation: what should we be teaching?

For almost two decades, pronunciation has been an orphan skill. In many programs, the subject has simply been abandoned. Nevertheless, thoughtful teachers have been well aware that poor pronunciation cuts students off from meaningful use of spoken English. As Leahy (1980:217) has observed, "If teachers are truly concerned with the well-being of their students, pronunciation should be one of their prime concerns." Why then has the subject been so neglected? Morley has commented,

> Perhaps the problem lies in conflict...between underlying concepts about language learning and language teaching which have changed a great deal during the past few years...and materials and methodologies which have not changed very much. (1975:83)

In the 1950's, ESL/EFL methodology was formed largely from structural linguistics and behavioural psychology. These theories produced at least two concepts which, when combined, have had an unfortunate effect on the teaching of pronunciation: 1) the most important part of pronunciation is individual sounds, and 2) learning comes from mechanical practice. Together these two ideas produced the ubiquitous minimal pair drill, repeated as many times as possible. Individual sounds, or "segmentals", were considered of first importance in studying a language; "suprasegmentals" (rhythm and intonation) were of secondary importance. Although many phonology

texts insisted that suprasegmentals were as important for communication as segmentals, the format of these same texts was giving quite a different message. Suprasegmentals typically had a small section at the back. Descriptions were daunting, to say the least, and tended to leave the teacher-in-training with the opposite of an enthusiasm for teaching the subject. All of these factors have led to an unfortunate ordering of priorities. Bolinger, describing the organization of his book, Forms of English put the imbalance this way:

> Part I looks at those components of speech that come first for the child but last for the analyst: intonation, accent and stress, and rhythm. If the child could paint the picture, these would be the wave on which the other components ride up and down; but the linguist is older and stronger, and has his way--he calls them suprasegmentals, and makes the wave ride on top of the ship. (1965:vii)

The emphasis on individual sounds has had a dire consequence: pronunciation has been pushed into a small corner of the curriculum because it has seemed both unproductive and worrisome technically. Now, however, currents have begun to flow in the opposite direction. The influx of South East Asian immigrants, with accents so heavy that teachers despair of their students' job future, has occurred about the same time that new research in the fields of discourse analysis and speech perception make it possible to take a new look at teaching pronunciation.

The most useful approach is to ask what aspects of

pronunciation have the most effect on communication. To be specific, what is the practical difference between segmental errors and suprasegmental errors?

Consider this situation: A customer in a pet shop is puzzled by the sign over an aquarium: "Bleeding fish for sale". If the customer is clever, and takes into account the Japanese origin of the store manager, the puzzle can be solved by substituting an /r/. However fatiguing, segmental interference may be overcome by the listener, as the regular pattern of substitution of sounds becomes apparent. On the other hand, prosodic interference (inappropriate emphasis and grouping) is compounding in its bad effect on communication. The communication difficulty caused by inappropriate phrasing and emphasis has been described this way,

> An appropriate prosodic pattern enhances and confirms the lexical message....An inappropriate prosodic pattern, however, denies or contradicts the lexical message... The effect of prosodic interference is cumulative, because the inappropriate and unresolved previous patterns have left no growing pattern to be guided by. Phonemic errors can be overcome by a process of elimination, gradually developing a "de-coding" system. But prosodic errors can't be overcome this way. Hence the trouble gets worse, not better.
> (Nash,1971:571)

This cumulative effect means that the listener cannot "tune in" to the speaker, and cannot relax vigilance. The result is apt to be that the listener becomes frustrated and simply gives up. A simple example is the rather common difficulty students have with series of numbers, as in a telephone number. Regardless of the care with which the individual numbers may be pronounced, the listener finds it difficult to understand the sequence if the phrasing is inappropriate:

254-1556 vs. the incorrect 2-54-556

Similarly, a failure to use or to recognize signals of emphasis can lead to confusion. For instance, which rejoinder would be most appropriate for the following remark?

But I wanted TWO coffees! 1. Oh, I thought you wanted one.
2. Oh, I thought you wanted tea.

Besides confusions of informational meaning, another common result of prosodic interference is misunderstanding on a personal level. It is common for such "mis-reading" of the other person's intentions to end in bad feelings.

Gumperz has written extensively about the cross-cultural confusions resulting from the mismatch between Indian English and Western English prosody. The prosodic markers are used differently and the subdivision of utterances into chunks is different. After describing these differences, he and Kaltman conclude:

> One important point is that while affect and information are always present together, what happens when we misinterpret each other is that we head for extreme judgements in these areas--make them into categories. Indians and Westerners make differing use of signalling options--their baselines are different....This is why we get recurrent confusions about attitude and why difficulties in exchanging information so inevitably become conflicts between personalities. (1980:61)

If intonation is so important, does this mean that individual sounds don't count? No, they do count, but there is evidence to suggest that they can be learned better when they are placed in the correct musical flow:

> From a formal point of view, voice and the associated prosodic features of rhythm and intonation, provide the essential framework within which vocal tract segmental features are temporally organized. This is a major justification for working on prosody before articulation and segmental phonology. (Abberton et al, 1978:36)

A practical example of this principle was given by an American teacher working in Portugal. He often has business in Spain, and commented that his pronunciation of Portuguese quite regularly took some time to adjust when he returned from a Spanish-speaking period. Then it occurred to him to concentrate on the musical pattern of the language. He said "When I focussed my mind on the intonation of Portuguese, my pronunciation made the shift to that language much more rapidly, because the sounds of Portuguese don't fit into the rhythm of Spanish."

Morley explained why her pronunciation text devotes the first half of the book to prosody:

> It is judged to be of fundamental importance to build a base of experience with some synthesizing aspects of the prosodic structure of spoken English at the outset, before work with individual sound segments is taken up in order to...orient students to the dynamic nature of "pronunciation"--speech as a moving process, not a series of isolated postures. (1979, preface)

Every language uses prosody to convey meaning, but not all in the same ways. In English, if the rhythm is so wrong that the listener cannot identify the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, the sentence may be unintelligible even though the individual sounds can be clearly identified. There is some evidence to suggest that, in English, words are stored in memory by their stress patterns (Brown, 1977:48). Bowen et al. wrote that "Studies have shown that misplaced stresses result in comprehension failures more readily than wrong sounds." (1986:134)

The combination of comprehension failure and resultant ill-will is demonstrated by the story an English teacher from Colombia told of about one of her students. He had newly returned from graduate study in the U.S.and she asked him how he felt about the experience. He summed up his dissatisfaction by saying "Everybody I met asked me what my major was, and when I said it was eCOnomics, they pretended not to understand." This is a sadly familiar story.

Brazil et al. gave a different argument for the importance of teaching prosody:

> At a time when communicative competence has emerged as a goal for the language learner, it would seem that the time is ripe for considering ways of integrating the teaching of intonation into the language syllabus. (1980:117)

If intonation is more important than individual sounds, what aspects of intonation should we teach? For practical purposes in the ESL classroom, there are two major functions: 1) marking the distinctions between old and new information; and 2) signalling the boundaries of thought groups.

NEW INFORMATION

Every language has a way to show the difference between "old information" and "new information". In English, word order and intonation play a major role in showing this distinction between ideas already discussed or mutually understood, and the new thought to which the speaker wishes to call attention. Words whose referents are old information are pronounced with weak stress and low pitch. (Chafe, 1980:10) Words which are the focus of thought, the new information, are highlighted by intonation:

1. Did you have a good day?
   I had a bloody HORRible day. (Cruttendon, 1986:89)
2. It WAS alive. (but it isn't now.)

Native speakers of English generally assume that this intonational emphasis is a natural part of speech, but in fact it is highly language-specific. English relies more heavily on intonation for this function than other languages do. Linguists from different disciplines have commented on the highlighting function of intonation:

> Prosody is seen...as helping direct attention to...the potentially most informative parts of speech. ...the rhythmic and melodic aspects of speech may allow the

> listener to predict when potentially important speech material will arrive (and perhaps allow him to allocate his processing capacity accordingly)... (Darwin,1975:103-112)

> Highlighting, by means of the application of a pitch-stress focus...is very frequently used to emphasize an item the speaker thinks is particularly important, or that carries new and contrasting information. (Bowen,1975:91)

Allen gave some exceptionally clear examples examples of shifting focus of attention:

X: I've lost an umBRELLa.

Y: A LAdy's umbrella?

X: Yes. A lady's umbrella with STARS on it.
GREEN stars. (Allen. 1971:77)

THOUGHT GROUPS

The stream of talk does not flow along smoothly but is composed of a series of brief spurts. When we listen to speech we do not generally notice this intermittent quality, but get an impression of smooth continuity. These spurts of speech are the organization of the speaker's thoughts into groups: phrases, clauses, and larger utterances, which are the "linguistic expressions of focuses of consciousness" (Chafe, 1970:15). This aspect of speech has been called "chunking" by some researchers:

> By tone grouping, or utterance chunking, a speaker organizes information into groups...Prosody therefore becomes an integral part of the linguistic processes by which we signal information about thematic cohesion, perspective, message prominence and distinctions such as those between shared and nonshared, main and subsidiary information. (Gumperz and Kaltman, 1980:32,62)

One way to understand the importance of chunking is to remember the difficulty created if a telephone number is incorrectly grouped. Another simple example is the effect grouping has on an arithmatic problem:

$2 \times (3 + 4) = 14$ vs. $(2 \times 3) + 4 = 10$

If the numbers are grouped differently, the answer is different. In the same way, words are grouped in English in order to achieve different meanings:

a. She likes pie and apples.

b. She likes pineapples.

(Gilbert 1984)

In written English, punctuation is used to help the reader separate thought-groups. Not only does written English have punctuation as an aid, but the reader can always reread if there is some confusion. For example:

a. John said, "The boss is stupid."

b. "John," said the boss, "is stupid."

In spoken language, on the other hand, there is neither punctuation nor the opportunity to recheck the words. Therefore all languages have some kind of markers to help the listener be sure of the grouping. These markers are necessary because chunking is an essential processing mechanism for the listener (Pribam, 1980).

The English prosodic markers for thought-groups must be taught along with the language, because other languages do not necessarily have the same marking system, or the same grouping.Ballmer; Meara; Grosjean, 1980)

The signals for marking English thought-groups in speech are a) pause, b) a drop in pitch, and c) lengthening of one or more syllables preceeding the end. In slow speech, the pause is the most obvious marker of end-of-thought:

1. (a+b) x (c) = a + (bxc) =
2. Do you want Super Salad?
3. Do you want soup or salad?

(Gilbert 1984)

During speech which is too rapid for pauses, a falling pitch is the essential signal. In general, pitch-fall means "end", and there is a relationship between the degree of finality and the amount of the

fall. Bolinger wrote that the metaphorical associations of up and down are fundamental to our organization of experience, and commented:

> Its most clear-cut grammatical application is the opposition of inconclusiveness and conclusiveness. In the course of action we are up and moving; at the end, we sit or lie down to rest. In a discourse this translates to higher pitches while utterance is in progress and a fall at the end. (1985:99)

Native speakers lengthen syllables toward the end of a group; this lengthening may exist in order to give time for the pitch fall (see O'Malley et al.,1973;Klatt,1975;Lehiste,1977). Although the phenomenon is systematic, it is likely that this signal is too subtle for an ESL classroom. The most practical approach is simply to teach the signals of pause and pitch fall. With these two markers of thought group ending, a language learner can be helped to improve both intelligibility, and listening comprehension.

Despite the growing wealth of research to support the teaching of prosody, pronunciation classes continue to emphasize segmentals. Reliance on minimal pair drill, even for those teachers who intuitively sense the importance of intonation, is a kind of methodological undertow. Why has the teaching of intonation been so slow to catch on? Traditions of language teaching are often resistent to change, but there are also powerful psychological factors which may be important.

Stevick has offered an intriguing insight into the difficulty of teaching prosody in the classroom:

> ...suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation...are the parts of pronunciation which carry the greatest amount of information about the student's loyalty to his native group, or his openness to the target culture. (1978:146)

This insight is an important clue to one of the reasons why "repeat after me" is an ineffective way to teach intonation. On the other hand, it seems possible that psychological resistance to sounding like the speakers of the new language may be lowered by approaching the pronunciation lesson from a more neutral position, as a study of the way a student can make his or her own intent clear. Instead of focussing on correctness and incorrectness, the function of the class is to direct attention to the speaker's choice of emphasis. Students who resent being required to repeat assigned sentences may find this class focus far more personally rewarding and, at the same time, less threatening to cultural identity. The most useful direction for materials writers would seem to be in the construction of exercises which encourage students to apply specific emphasis markers to their own words.

Allen has suggested one approach to helping students overcome psychological resistence. She encourages the use of skits "in which identification with native speaking characters could encourage at least temporary suspension of the student's clinging to cultural identity."(1986, personal communication)

Acton presents an approach to teaching suprasegmentals by physically marking sentence accents. He suggests that deliberate physical motions of the upper body can encourage awareness of sentence emphasis (in press). Reinforcing this insight is Bolinger's comment, when he wrote about the way a speaker distinguishes important from less important points, by use of gesture:

> Watching a speaker from a distance--and not understanding a word--one can often tell when an accent is being supplied by observing shifts in bodily movement that take place. (1986:15)

Prosody is the music of a language, and each language has its own. There is research evidence to support the claim that languages can be identified by their prosody alone, with no segmental information present (Ohala and Gilbert, 1981). Bolinger (1968) stated that a child can use intonation patterns correctly as early as four months of age. The child, learning the basic prosody of the first language so early, then uses it automatically. This would explain the typically automatic transfer of prosodic patterns to a target language; they are habitual and below the level of consciousness.

Part of the problem must be that one of the first things a baby has to learn is to ignore linguistically non-relevant sound: coughs, sniffs, humming noises, pots banging on stoves etc. In order to learn to comprehend language, the baby must put all non-linguistic noises in a separate category and process only those sounds which are a systematic part of the language. The result, it seems reasonable to

assume, is that it is difficult for the grown person to "hear" (i.e., notice) a foreign sound or pattern of sounds: for instance, clicks in an African language, or tone patterns in an Asian language. Those elements which do not exist in the student's mother tongue or which are not used for the same functions, tend to be ignored; they do not seem to signify anything. Since prosodic factors tend to be the least conscious part of pronunciation, they are the very elements in most urgent need of explicit teaching.

Students can be taught conscious awareness of pitch, syllable number and length, and vowel clarity contrasts (Gilbert 1983). The heightened alertness to prosodic signals, and an understanding of their discourse functions, have powerful implications for language learning. Besides pronunciation, the skill most directly affected by prosodic competence is listening comprehension. Richards, in a taxonomy of listening skills, put the ability to retain chunks of language of different lengths for short periods at the top of the list. Following close is "the ability to recognize the functions of stress and intonation to signal the information structure of utterances." (Richards,1983:228)

One way the information structure, or thematic cohesion, is signalled is with the use of a distinctive pitch pattern to mark words serving the same function. For instance, a lecturer may say "First of all..." and later use the same pitch pattern to say "Secondly..." This intonational cueing is similar to the use of background music in the

score of a movie, when a similar emotion is meant to be experienced. The musical cue will echo an earlier moment. The resonance created by this signal helps make clear the structural outline of the story. A good example is the use of music in the movie, "Jaws". When the audience hears the shark music, they are prepared for the reappearance of the shark. In the same way, intonational cueing helps the listener to predict what the speaker may say next. This aid to prediction is an important element in improving listening comprehension.

Spoken communication is not the only aspect of language which can be improved by teaching the basic elements of discourse intonation. Brazil et al. asked the language teacher to consider the potential for enhancing reading comprehension:

> There is also an argument for teaching some general aspects of intonation to people who do not need active oral skills, but who do need to be able to read fluently.... Listening to phrasing, or intonational units such as tone units, gives overt phonological marking to major constituents in sentence structure...thus intonation can assist the development of receptive skills and can help the student to process "what goes with what" and how the information structure of a text develops. (Brazil et al.1980:131)

In summary, I would like to suggest that by putting more attention to prosody than to individual sounds, we will be giving English teaching a more communicative setting; the whole rhetorical

flow of meaning is tied together by the music of the language.

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